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## **Bush Shines in the Time of the Lie**

by Gordon Livingston

IT IS SAID that each of society's institutions is a crystallization of the dominant values of the culture. If so, we appear to be living in the time of the lie.

Falsehoods perpetrated by journalists have been much in the news of late, and confidence in the veracity of those who inform us is at a low point. Not so long ago it was the business world that appeared at the forefront of lying as Enron, WorldCom and Arthur Andersen became familiar names.

The military in the recent action in Iraq treated us to the Jessica Lynch POW rescue, which turned out to be an elaborate fabrication notable for its absence of enemy soldiers, not to mention the disappearing gunshot and stab wounds that she was alleged to have suffered.

Lying has traditionally been seen as an inevitable part of politics. A recent study by political scientists in Britain said, "Politics should be regarded as less like an exercise in producing truthful statements and more like a poker game" in which deception is understood.

This cynical view appears to be implicitly endorsed by the current administration, which has so inundated us with lies that most of them pass unnoticed. Unlike the lies about sex that are the legacy of our previous president, the ones being perpetrated by Bush & Co. appear more consequential.

The central rationale behind the invasion of Iraq was the certain threat posed by its weapons of mass destruction, including the imminent development of a nuclear capability.

In the aftermath of the war, we are left with the argument that while we have found no significant evidence of chemical, biological or nuclear weaponry, Saddam Hussein was a despot who mistreated his own people and the war was therefore justified. Contrary to the administration's prewar claims, the CIA, FBI and British intelligence have found no link between al-Qaida and Iraq.

On the home front, President Bush proclaimed that a report by leading economists concluded that the economy would grow by 3.3 percent in 2003 if his tax cut proposals were adopted. No such report exists.

To explain why he has turned a \$236 billion budget surplus into a projected \$307 billion

deficit in 2004, the president claimed that he had said during the campaign that he would allow the federal budget to go into deficit in times of war, recession or national emergency but never imagined he would have a "trifecta." Actually, Mr. Bush never made such a campaign statement. These three caveats on deficits were promulgated by Al Gore.

While Richard Nixon set the standard on presidential lying, it was Ronald Reagan who seemed to blur the lines between fiction and reality, as when he told anecdotes from movie plots as if they had really happened.

Listen to President Bush in December 2001 explaining publicly how he learned about the terrorist attacks three months before: "I was in Florida. And ... I was sitting outside [an elementary school] classroom waiting to go in, and I saw an airplane hit the tower - the TV was obviously on, and I used to fly myself, and I said, 'There's one terrible pilot.'"

This account is obviously false since network cameras were not trained on the towers at the time the first airliner hit; it was only later that amateur video of this event was broadcast.

The president also said to the father of twins, "I've been to war. I've raised twins. If I had a choice, I'd rather go to war." Mr. Bush was a member of the Texas Air National Guard between 1968 and 1973 and never left the country in pursuit of his duties.

It's too facile to say that all politicians lie and that leaders commonly deceive in pursuit of their goals. We are entitled to expect more from someone who campaigned on a pledge to "restore integrity to the White House."

A complex society, no less than a family, functions on the basis of trust. If we cannot depend on each other to obey the law, we risk chaos and there is no number of police that will save us. If, as the result of being lied to, we lose trust in those who govern, how can they ask us to put our sons and daughters in peril?

The people who founded this country promised more than their lives and fortunes to the risky cause of independence. They pledged their sacred honor. Should we expect less from the leaders of today?

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